

Eugene William Lyman Lecture  
in the Philosophy of Religion

LIBERALISM OLD AND NEW

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*The Eugene William Lyman Lectureship in the Philosophy of Religion was established at Sweet Briar College in 1948, in loving memory of a great teacher, scholar, and author. Dr. Lyman lived at Sweet Briar from the time of his retirement from Union Theological Seminary in 1940 until his death eight years later. It is the hope of his friends and admirers that this Lectureship may fittingly honor his memory by carrying forward his lifelong and devoted quest for truth.*

*President Seelye Bixler of Colby College, once a student of Dr. Lyman, gave the first Lyman Lecture at Sweet Briar College on February 4, 1949, on the subject, "The Deeper Ranges of Authority." The second lecture in the series was given October 20, 1950, by Dr. Charles Earle Raven of Cambridge University, on "The Present Position and Prospects of Liberal Theology." Professor Horton, who delivered this third Eugene William Lyman Lecture, is a former student and colleague of Dr. Lyman.*

## LIBERALISM OLD AND NEW

I cannot begin this Lyman Lecture without a confession of deep personal indebtedness to the man for whom it is named. Eugene Lyman did more to shape my thought and stabilize my faith than any other man. My first theological essay was published at his suggestion; my first theological teaching was done under his supervision. In the thirty years that elapsed between my first class with him at Union Seminary and my last visit with him at Sweet Briar, a few months before his death, my respect for his wisdom and judgment continued to grow. May the thoughts that are expressed here tonight be worthy of his name, and in some real sense constitute a continuation of his work!

To continue the work of such a staunch religious liberal as Eugene Lyman into the second half of the twentieth century may seem like counting on the continuance of summer weather into December. Beyond all doubt, there has been a great change in the climate of opinion since Lyman began to teach and write in the early years of this century. Then, liberalism grew and thrived, in a verdant world where the whole course of events seemed to smile upon the liberal creed; now, in the colder intellectual climate of these latter years, liberalism seems touched by frost, and that tough, scrubby evergreen known as neo-orthodoxy flourishes in its place. Since it is the essential genius of liberalism to fit its message to the time in which it lives, this lack of harmony between the liberal creed and the contemporary situation is a very serious matter. Orthodoxy may sometimes stubbornly ignore or defy its environment; but a liberalism out of touch with its age is by its own professed principles unfit to survive!



I hold no brief for the continuance, unaltered, of the older type of liberalism that prevailed at the turn of the century. As far back as 1934 I became convinced of its radical defects, and announced its demise (prematurely, some critics have said) without too much regret. What I do believe to be possible and needful in this age of neo-orthodox hegemony is the development of a *new liberalism*, relevant to the new situation, which would continue the old liberalism somewhat as the butterfly continues the caterpillar, sloughing off its old dried-up skin but perpetuating its vital principle.

The *possibility* of such a new liberalism first appeared to me ten years ago, when I made a study of Professor Lyman's whole theological development for the symposium on *Liberal Theology* issued in his honor after his retirement. It became very clear in the course of this study that Lyman was a liberal from start to finish, but never fell into the glaring errors usually denounced by the critics of the older liberalism; and toward the end of his teaching career he analyzed the "Permanent Values in Liberal Christian Theology"<sup>(1)</sup> in terms that foreshadowed a new formulation of the liberal position.

The *need* of such a reformulated liberalism has become particularly evident to me since the Second World War. A mood of pessimism and futility has descended upon our age, from which neo-orthodoxy — which did so much to rescue us from Utopian optimism and foolish complacency in the critical years before that war—has so far been unable to deliver us. Neo-orthodoxy has probably not yet rendered its full potential services to Christian thought, especially in America; but it needs a new strong opposition party to point out its dangers and correct its defects, just as the old liberalism needed opposition and correction, twenty-five years ago. Both in politics and in theology a two-party system is better than a one-party system. A good strong opposition-party keeps the ruling party humble, while waiting for the day when the roles will be reversed.

(1). *Union Review*, May, 1940, pp. 5 *et seq.*



A European theologian said to me two years ago that the most alarming feature of the present theological situation on the Continent is the absence of any strong movement continuing the liberal tradition in the face of what almost amounts to a neo-orthodox monopoly. Now, to be sure, one begins to hear rumors of a new liberal uprising on the Continent. Barth himself, the founder of the neo-orthodox movement, has recently declared to an American visitor that in his former disciple, Bultmann, he sees the beginning of that "violent come-back of modernism" which he has often warned his students would some day occur. There are some theological faculties on the Continent, less strictly "confessionalist" than others, where such a liberal uprising might conceivably start; but the liberal tradition has become so nearly extinct in Europe that the new liberalism seems less likely to take its rise there than in America, where liberalism has remained pretty vigorous and even aggressive in certain theological schools—for example, at Boston University.

It may of course be argued (as the *Christian Century* did argue in a series of articles several years ago) that the neo-orthodox movement is itself the natural heir of liberalism, seeing that it prefers the liberal to the literal style of Bible interpretation, and at several other points is more akin to the old liberalism than to the old orthodoxy. One may add that in the development of neo-orthodoxy, the Swedish school of Aulén and Nygren, and still more the American school of Niebuhr and Tillich have gone far to the left of the Swiss school of Barth and Brunner, while even in Switzerland Brunner has criticized Barth, and (thank God for the edifying spectacle!) Barth himself has frequently corrected Barth, often from a liberal rather than conservative angle. All these facts may be admitted without weakening the thesis that a neo-liberal party is needed as a counterpoise and corrective to the neo-orthodox party. All schools of thought, in theology as in politics, are capable of borrowing truths from other schools; but

only so much borrowing is admissible as can be kept in harmony with the dominant emphasis. A good deal of liberalism is compatible with neo-orthodoxy—or for that matter, with older forms of orthodoxy, both Catholic and Protestant—but unless there is also a strong, self-conscious liberal party, the liberalism dissolved and diffused in orthodoxy will be too weak to perform the distinctive function which liberalism is called to fulfill in every generation.

What this function is, we have already indicated: *It is the essential genius of liberalism to fit its message to the time in which it lives.* The danger, of course, is that the Christian Gospel, to which liberal Christian thought means to be loyal, may be dissolved or deformed in the process of adjusting it to its changing environment. When this occurs, a chorus of orthodox criticism always arises, and the Christian message is restated in a form more consonant with its original documents and classic expressions. But orthodoxy, too, has its besetting danger, that of using language and thought-forms which have no meaning for the contemporary mind. When this occurs, a liberal restatement of the message is needed.

There is considerable evidence that neo-orthodoxy has not avoided this danger, and needs to be extricated from it by a new liberalism. In Continental Europe, where neo-orthodoxy has had so large an influence, there is a wide-spread popular hunger for religious faith, but the neo-orthodox interpretation of Christianity often strikes the lay mind as so archaic, so technical, so remote from life, that "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed." One of my former students recently spent a semester in a German university, where he fraternized with the non-theological students, and learned what they thought of the theological students. They envied the faith of the "theologs"; wished they had something like it; but the language and thought-forms in which this faith was expressed completely mystified them; and when they put questions to the "theologs," they got no intelligible answers. "Evidently," they said, "Christian



faith is something you have or you don't have; if you don't have it, the language of faith means literally nothing to you."

If we seriously believe in the Christian Gospel as the everlasting hope of mankind, this veiling of the Word of Life in unintelligible verbiage, just when men's hearts are open and their minds receptive to it, this incapacity of faith to speak to the questions now being asked, must seem a tragic and intolerable situation, to be ended as speedily as possible. Not from partisan motives do we ask for a new party; but because Christianity is a missionary religion, and because every effective missionary appeal must speak intelligibly to men's actual condition, we must establish a new liberal movement to break the deadlock between the new orthodoxy and the modern secular mind. There never was a great missionary advance, such as the crisis of modern Christendom imperatively demands, without a liberal reinterpretation of the Christian message to fit the condition of the age. No one disputes the orthodoxy of men like Paul, Francis of Assisi, Francis Xavier, Wesley and Moody; but without a dash of liberalism not one of them could have been the great missionary he was. Let our new liberalism, too, be respectful of classic Christian orthodoxy, and willing to learn from the new orthodoxy; but let it be unmercifully critical of all merely archaic and irrelevant elements in the Christian tradition, and eagerly sensitive to all genuine points of contact between the Gospel and the contemporary mind.

That is the perennial task of Christian liberalism in every generation: to sift the Christian tradition and find in it what is most relevant to the existing condition of mankind, and most consistent with truth in other fields. We have now to ask how this task is to be performed in the generation just ahead, amid the instabilities of modern world politics and the relativities of modern social ethics. I suggest that the best way to define the needed new position is first to describe the old liberalism



in its popular form, at the turn of the century; then to consider wherein the new orthodoxy justly criticized and corrected the older liberal view, in the period following the First World War; finally to consider how the new liberalism needs to criticize and correct the new orthodoxy in its turn, while taking due account of its lasting contributions to Christian thought. We shall follow this sequence four times, corresponding to the four "permanent values" which Professor Lyman saw in liberal Christian theology, and corresponding also to the four major themes with which all religious thought is necessarily concerned: (1) *Faith and Reason*, or the Pathways to Religious Knowledge; (2) *God*, or the Ground of Trust; (3) *Christ*, or the Way of Salvation; and (4) the *Kingdom of God*, or the Goal of Hope.

### 1. *Faith and Reason.*

The old liberalism certainly *intended* to maintain what Lyman calls "a close and vital relation between faith and reason."<sup>(1)</sup> As Canon Raven quite rightly points out in his Lyman Lecture, the purpose of liberal theology was not to undermine the Christian faith, but to uphold and confirm it in the face of a scientific agnosticism which threatened at times to destroy it. One of the perpetual concerns, and on the whole, one of the most successful endeavors of the old liberalism, was so to reconcile science with faith, that one could simultaneously accept scientific Biblical criticism and the truth of the Bible's religious message, or biological evolution and divine creation. The formula of reconciliation was not always the same; but a formula widely accepted at the turn of the century—one that was constantly quoted by Dr. Henry Churchill King, my predecessor in the chair of theology at Oberlin—was Lotze's dictum, "Mechanism universal in extent, subordinate in significance." The implication of this theory is that everything in the uni-

(1). This and corresponding quotations are from the above cited article in the *Union Review*.

verse, and the universe as a whole, can be viewed from two different angles, without violating the ultimate harmony of all truth: from the scientific angle as mechanical, from the religious angle as purposive and meaningful. Both views are equally true, and perfectly consistent, but the religious view is more ultimately important.

While the intention of this and other schemes of reconciliation was to maintain the dignity and validity of religious faith, the effect on popular religious thought was sometimes quite different from what was intended. If faith and reason could be so harmoniously united as this, faith itself became part of a rational scheme, and this rational scheme was much more appealing than the confused imagery of the Bible. To be sure, the Bible could now be regarded, in Dr. Fosdick's terms, as a set of "abiding experiences" clothed in the "changing categories" of ancient thought; but if these experiences were "reproducible" today, as Dr. Fosdick affirmed, why bother to read the Bible in order to get them? Why load one's mind with outgrown pre-scientific Biblical categories, when one could experience the same God more directly and intelligibly in the context of a modern spiritual world-view, consistent with natural science? Why study Christian theology in its traditional crabbed terminology, full of strange echoes of by-gone creeds, when one could take a thoroughly modern course in religious philosophy or philosophy of religion? I well remember how wide-spread some of these popular deductions from liberalism were when I first went to Union Seminary, thirty-five years ago; how many students preferred to study *about* the Bible, instead of studying the Bible; how many grumbled and groaned about the required course in Systematic Theology, and when an unfeeling faculty refused to excuse them from thus wasting their time, slid through the course with a minimum of effort and attention!

I fear it must be admitted that in its popular form, the old liberalism did not maintain a proper balance



between faith and reason, but tended to dissolve the distinctive affirmations of the Christian faith in some rational scheme, which thus took the place of Biblical revelation as the principal authoritative source of Christian teaching. A Swedish student of American theology, George Hammar, claims that American liberal theology constantly tends to pass over into a "non-Christian secular philosophy of religion," based not on the Biblical revelation, but upon a "general revelation immanent in nature," so that the Christian idea of revelation as divine self-disclosure is "more or less dissolved."<sup>(1)</sup> I am sure that this diagnosis does *not* apply to our leading liberal theologians such as Clarke and Brown, but it applies so well to a wide-spread popular trend in American liberalism, that it fully justifies the neo-orthodox revolt against liberal rationalism, which later took place.

We must all be grateful to the neo-orthodox movement for bringing back the Bible to the central place in Christian thought that properly belongs to it, and for doing this without reverting to uncritical or anti-scientific views of Biblical authority. At this point, neo-orthodoxy carries on the liberal tradition while correcting a serious unintentional lapse from the best liberal principles: the tendency to interpret reason and experience as *substitutes* for the Christian revelation, rather than as the faculties by which it is received and understood. Again, we have to thank neo-orthodoxy for calling attention to what Kierkegaard called the "existential" element in religious faith, and the "paradoxical" form in which religious affirmations are typically expressed, *suggesting* and *symbolizing* truths that can never be adequately *conveyed* in rationally lucid propositions. Here too, there is no incompatibility with liberalism. Pragmatic liberals who never heard the word "existential" have talked about faith as a risky practical venture, in which one's very life is staked on the unknown outcome; while Bushnell's *Essay on Language*,

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(1). Hammar, *Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology*, Upsala, 1940, pp. 26, 160-163.



over a century ago, interpreted the Bible paradoxically and symbolically, quite like Barth or Niebuhr. It would be possible for an unreconstructed liberal of the old school to assimilate this much neo-orthodoxy, without ever changing his principles. I know at least one old-fashioned liberal who has done this to the great advantage of his thought and teaching.

Real conflict emerges when some neo-orthodox insist that the way of special Biblical revelation, full as it is of paradoxical oppositions and mysterious symbolism, is the *only* way to faith in God, and that natural theology, rational philosophy, and general revelation outside the Bible have *no* place in Christian thought. "There is no way from man to God; there is only a way from God to man," says Barth. That is to say, whenever man tries to think or argue his way to God by the use of reason, he commits idolatry and reduces God to the stature of a finite object. God must be allowed to speak for Himself; and when He speaks, all sorts of apparently contradictory assertions are to be expected. There is in all this a solemn and needed warning against trying to measure God's infinity by finite standards; but when *only* paradoxical statements about God are admitted, the concept of God becomes systematic nonsense, an abyss of darkness in which the "numinous" completely drives out the luminous, and no intelligible word comes forth from the thunders and lightnings that enwrap the Holy Mount.

Against this extreme irrationalism, many protests have now been raised, both in the orthodox and in the liberal camp. Catholics, Anglicans, and Fundamentalists all stoutly refuse to give up the "rational preambles" of their faith at Barth's command. With the neo-orthodox movement itself, Brunner gives a certain intelligible meaning to God's general self-revelation in the orders of creation; Aulén sees a certain intelligible unity among the attributes of God, despite their "tension;" Tillich works out a point-by-point correlation between the ascending motion of groping human reason

and the descending motion of divine revelation. When orthodox and neo-orthodox thus unite to defend reason against Barth's sweeping attack, it is hardly the time for liberals to be silent! If a strong stimulus were needed to bring liberalism back to life, hitting out hard, this ought to be it !

Among recent hard-hitting books from the liberal camp, Harold De Wolf's *Religious Revolt Against Reason* (1949) seems to me to prefigure most clearly the position that the new liberalism needs to take. After carefully estimating the contributions of the theology of paradox—its rejection of relativism, its refusal to limit God's being to the bounds of our knowledge, its stress upon the need of bold commitments and ventures of faith, even within the process of reasoning—Professor De Wolf accepts these as needed corrections of rationalism, perfectly acceptable to the Boston Personalist tradition; but he flatly refuses to exclude reason from the total act of religious thought. *Consistent* use of irrational paradox is not only nonsensical—since consistency is after all a *rational principle*—but it also threatens to destroy communication, breaks up the internal meaning of a system of belief, and worst of all, makes it impossible to distinguish between true and false revelations in a day when false gods and immoral standards of conduct beckon to us on every hand.<sup>(1)</sup>

We may venture to predict, then, that the new liberalism will give a central place to Biblical revelation in its theory of religious knowledge, and will not try to confine the mystery and majesty of God's being in a closed rational system, but will continue to maintain a place for reason as a confirmatory approach to faith, as a principle of harmony among religious ideas, and as a most necessary check upon the fanatical dogmatism of rival religious revelations—whose probable recourse is to violence and oppression, if reason refuses to judge between them.

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(1). *Op. cit.*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.



## 2. God

In any system of religious thought, the conception of religious knowledge and the conception of God are closely interrelated. God is believed to be what the admitted evidence discloses. We must expect to find, then, that the older liberalism lost the balance of its concept of God in proportion as it lost its original balance between faith and reason. It is true, as Professor Lyman says, that liberalism at its best maintains "the union of the transcendence and immanence of God;" but as the old liberalism so largely slipped over into a one-sided rationalism, by the same process it slipped over into a one-sided immanentism.

As a clear example of one-sided immanentism, let us take a sentence from a book published shortly before the turn of the century, Lyman Abbott's *Theology of an Evolutionist*: "God dwells in nature, fashioning it according to His will by vital processes from within, not by mechanical processes from without."<sup>(1)</sup> Or take the following phrase from Borden P. Bowne of Boston University, whose personalist philosophy has had such an immense influence on American liberal theology, throughout the twentieth century: "making the thing world the expression of a thought world behind it or immanent in it; which thought world, again, is the expression of a supreme intelligence which founds and coördinates both the thing world and the world of finite spirits."<sup>(2)</sup>

In both these quotations, God is portrayed as the indwelling Soul of the world, whose thought and energy and will are expressed in everything we see, and more especially in whatever lives and grows and thinks and acts. Absent from both is the sense, so strong in an Augustine or Kierkegaard, of the transcendent exaltation of the eternal Creator above all His temporal creatures—yes, above the whole created universe. With

(1). Abbott, *Theology of an Evolutionist* (1897), page 21.

(2). Bowne, *Theism*, (1902), page 145.



the closing or the minimizing of this mighty gulf, the majesty of God disappears, and He becomes, so to speak, identified with the regular course of nature, responsible for the usual course of human events. Neither Abbott nor Bowne intends to be a pantheist, a position which is expressly repudiated;<sup>(1)</sup> but their idealism makes them one-sided in their stress upon God's immanence.

So long as the usual course of events can be trusted and approved, the immanent God portrayed by this type of liberalism seems real and near; or as Bowne says, "We can find good reasons for the general order of things in its relation to man. A moral beneficence and wisdom are apparent."<sup>(2)</sup> When social order is disturbed and social chaos breaks loose, as has repeatedly occurred in the years since 1914, faith in the immanent God is severely shaken. Some, shocked at the implication that God is responsible for the horrors they face, shift to the idea of a limited God, struggling against the dark forces that are beyond Him as they are beyond us; others give up faith altogether, and become religious humanists; but most typically, and most widely, the adjustment to the new world-situation is made by shifting the emphasis from God's immanence to His transcendence, as is done in neo-orthodoxy.

God in neo-orthodoxy is sharply dissociated from the present disastrous course of events, and stands above it as transcendent Judge. Two chaplains in World War I both raised as idealistic liberals, have told me of the effect of that war upon their faith. One lost his liberal God, on a night of horrors in No Man's Land, and had to wander in semi-darkness for years thereafter; the other met Karl Barth's teaching in the nick of time, and found it spoke directly to his condition. It lifted him above an evil world into a transcendent realm where God's holiness condemns the evil, while His power promises eventually to overcome it.

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(1). *Ibid.*, page 288.

(2). *Ibid.*, page 280.

Throughout the twenty years that followed World War I, Barth's favorite doctrine (borrowed from Kierkegaard) of the "infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity," between the worldliness of the world and the transcendent holiness of God, continued to be good strong medicine for a world in danger, needing to be called to judgment and summoned to repentance. Every temptation to be content with any human institution or movement, to see in it the working of God's providence, was rejected by the Barthians with a kind of fierce Mohammedan zeal—which stood them in good stead when faced by the Nazi claim that God's hand was to be seen in the glorious Hitler revolution of 1933. In our own country, too, the prophetic witness of Reinhold Niebuhr helped to arouse us from complacent self-confidence, and brace us to endure tragedy, as no one-sided doctrine of divine immanence could possibly have done.

Recently, however, it has become evident that the exclusive neo-orthodox emphasis on divine transcendence is a case of over-compensation, which needs to be corrected in its turn. A divine Judge can be located aloft in the sky, so to speak, raining down disciplinary thunder-bolts like angry Jupiter; but a God of grace must have healing contact with earth and man. Both Barth and Niebuhr now recognize that our age is in danger of despair, and desperately needs the assurance of God's forgiving, healing, life-giving grace; <sup>(1)</sup> but though both men recognize that this is part of the Gospel, they are considerably hampered in preaching it by their habitual one-sided stress upon divine transcendence, which makes God seem too distant to be gracious. A new liberalism, unhampered by this stress, and maintaining a better balance than the old liberalism between transcendence and immanence, should be able to preach judgment as well as Barth or Niebuhr, while preaching grace as well as Wesley or Moody. The whole Christian message requires both at

(1). Barth is quoted as saying, "Pessimism is *also* a heresy."



once. "Come, and let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up."<sup>(1)</sup> There is a paradox here indeed; but it is a luminous paradox, both sides of which reveal the same God, whose judgment is part of his mercy.

### 3. *Christ*

The transcendence and immanence of God are closely related to the conception of Christ as the Way of Salvation. An over-emphasis on immanence brings God and man so near that all men are divine and a Savior is not needed; an over-emphasis on transcendence holds God and man so far apart that a divine-human Mediator between them becomes quite inconceivable.

When the old liberalism's one-sided immanentism is consistently applied to the doctrine of Christ, it gives us a Christ barely distinguishable from the rest of the human race, and a human race barely distinguishable from God. Perhaps the boldest and clearest expression of this point of view is to be found in *The New Theology*, published in 1907 by R. J. Campbell, then the liberal minister of the City Temple in London. "Strictly speaking", says Campbell, "The human and the divine are two categories which shade into and imply each other; humanity is Divinity, viewed from below, Divinity is humanity viewed from above."<sup>(2)</sup> From this perspective, Campbell judges that all humanity and indeed all the universe are divine in a sense, as diverse expressions of the cosmic Mind and Will. Even a crocodile is divine, but General Booth is more divine than a crocodile; even an ordinary human life is divine, but the life of Jesus is especially divine as "the one perfect human life, that is, the one life which consistently and from first to last was lived in terms of the whole,"<sup>(3)</sup> — thus fully expressing the World-Soul which we all express in various manners. I think it is

(1). Hosea 6:1 (R.S.V.).

(2). R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology*, pp. 74, 75.

(3). Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

evident that for this type of liberalism there is no real need of a Savior; mankind is already, so to speak, hell-bent for heaven. Whatever maladjustments arise from time to time between the lower and the higher impulses of our divine human nature are being progressively overcome by the World-Soul as it triumphantly evolves toward complete self-expression in nature and history. No one in such a world can really be lost, so no one really needs to be saved. Campbell with his usual indiscretion states flatly that evil is non-existent—"The devil is a vacuum"—and what we call "sin," even in the most repellent forms, is a "dim, blundering quest for God, whom to know is life eternal."<sup>(1)</sup>

This type of liberal optimism about human nature, this confidence that man is moving toward his true destiny through the steady unfolding of the God within him, has certainly not been justified by the events of the twentieth century. The moral to be drawn from these events can be tersely expressed in the text of one of Reinhold Niebuhr's sermons: "Cursed be the man that putteth his trust in man!" Man in the twentieth century has been let down and frustrated so often by his fellow-men, that he feels caught in a sort of prison, from which he cannot escape unless released from outside; and his Rescuer has to be endued with something more than human power; he needs power from above, strong enough to break bars of brass. Under these circumstances a respectful hearing must be given to the neo-orthodox doctrine of Christ, as one who comes from above, from a transcendent world, and whose divine-humanity is not merely a slight heightening of average humanity, but the amazing Miracle and "Absolute Paradox"<sup>(2)</sup> of heaven come down to earth, and the Creator becoming a creature.

A respectful hearing, but also a critical hearing. *Respectful*, because it is evident that the dimension of transcendent depth needed to be restored to that

(1). Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

(2). Kierkegaard's expression.



conception of Christ which we have described; and when this is done, it is bound to become a more difficult and paradoxical idea than it was before. *Critical*, because of the real danger that in restoring the dimension of transcendence, the dimension of immanence may be lost, and so the saviorhood of Christ may be denied again just as it is being reaffirmed. The intention of neo-orthodoxy is of course to reaffirm the doctrine of Christ as the God-man, "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven . . . and was made man;" but in its handling of the earthly life of this heavenly visitant, it often shows itself strangely negative. There is nothing specific in the life or the teaching of Jesus that can be pointed to as clearly manifesting the presence of God. His incognito is impenetrable except to the eye of faith; and faith, according to Kierkegaard, declares that "History has nothing whatever to do with Christ . . . . He is the paradox, which history can never digest or convert into a common syllogism."<sup>(1)</sup> This is the point where Christ's saviorhood threatens to slip away again; for if the Savior gives no clear guidance, no specific help, *here on the plane of history where we live*, he is not the Lord we seek and we must look for another.

There is truth in Kierkegaard's view that must be weighed and accepted by the new liberalism. It is true that no *merely* historical approach to the life and teaching of Jesus can recognize him as Savior; only if faith sees in him the Wisdom and Power of the same eternal God in whose hands our destinies still rest, can it trust him as Savior. But how can faith see God's Wisdom and Power in Jesus, if the story of his life and the history of his influence are as utterly mystifying, as darkly opaque as Kierkegaard says? Why all the excitement in Galilee and Jerusalem, if not because even the secular and unbelieving mind could perceive a strange grandeur in this lowly but extraordinary Man? Why have men called him Lord and God all through

(1). Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, page 392.

the centuries, and bowed to him rather than to Mohammed or Confucius or some other, if they have not found in his recorded words and deeds some credible sign of God's presence? I agree with Lyman that liberal theology has a valuable and permanent contribution to make, in its firm "insistence upon the centrality of the historical personality of Jesus Christ for our faith and our salvation." St. Augustine remarked long ago that the way of salvation "passes through Christ as man to Christ as God."<sup>(1)</sup> It is one of the duties of the new liberalism to see that the man Jesus, through whose human lips the first apostles were called, is not carelessly by-passed by the new orthodoxy. Only a transcendent *and* immanent Christ can be the Way to the transcendent and immanent God.

#### 4. *The Kingdom of God.*

The last of the four permanent values in liberalism, according to Professor Lyman, is to be found in "the close and vital relation which it sees between the religious and ethical in the Christian way of life," a relation which is particularly clear in its conception "that God wills the redemption of society as well as the individual, and that as individuals experience redemption they become centers of redemptive living in society."

Such an explicit avowal of belief in the social gospel and its hope of a Kingdom of God on earth takes courage to make, nowadays. Every one knows how many illusions were connected with this hope, at the turn of the century, and how tragically these illusions have been dissipated. Bernard Iddings Bell, in the Foreword to one of his books,<sup>(2)</sup> tells how his father called the children together on Dec. 31, 1899, and spoke to them solemnly about the privileges they would enjoy in the glorious century about to dawn: through the advance of science and communications, superstition and illiteracy

(1). *Per hominem Christum tendis ad deum Christum.* (Quoted in Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, page 45.)

(2). Bell, *A Man Can Live*, pp. 9, 10.



would be conquered, and above all, "war would be unimaginable in the twentieth century."

These deceptive expectations were shared by many liberal Christians, at that time, as a logical consequence of the idealistic world-view which we have already studied in other connections. No one today could believe in the doctrine of progress in just this form, no matter how hard he tried; and we shall of course not try to defend the old liberalism at this point. Here is where the old liberalism was first effectually attacked by its critics; here is where its defenses first crumbled. Today there is substantial agreement between liberal and conservative religious thought, that progress is *not* automatically and irreversibly taking place in man's moral condition, whatever may happen on the plane of technological improvement. The liberalism that is fit to survive into the second half of this century is a liberalism minus this illusion.

What then? Is the prayer, "Thy Kingdom come on earth," no longer to be prayed? Is the hope of a better social order, which human hands can help in some measure to build, no longer part of the Christian hope? Sweepingly negative answers have been given to these questions. In Barth's early writings, there is for example a purely eternalistic or Platonic conception of the Kingdom of God. That means there is nothing to hope for in future history; man's true hope lies in turning his eyes vertically upward, to that eternal Kingdom in the heavens which overarches all times. This Kingdom is as near to us now as it ever will be. Now I think it has been one of the great and lasting contributions of neo-orthodoxy to reassert the eternal meaning of the Kingdom of God after a period of feverish futurism, when Utopian dreams of coming happiness on earth almost crowded the hope of heaven out of men's minds; but excessive concentration on the eternal hope may undermine the sense of social responsibility, and strip future history of all meaning.

I am glad to say that Barth himself and many of his followers have modified their strict eternalism in recent years, as a result of a closer study of the Bible. It has become clear that history, for the Bible, is a dramatic forward march, through many vicissitudes, toward goals that are at least partially realized on earth; and eternity is the consummation of this drama, not its reduction to absurdity. Since on this subject the new orthodoxy has proved admirably open to correction, there is a fair chance that the new liberalism, by offering a revised version of the old social gospel, might even collaborate with its opponents in formulating a more adequate version of the Christian hope than either party could formulate by itself. In the preparation for the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954, which is to deal with the Christian hope as its main theme, theologians of these two opposite trends have already had a profitable wrestle with one another, from which better documents have come than either group could produce alone.

How should the new liberalism revise its version of the social gospel, and its conception of the Kingdom of God on earth, in order to play its proper part in this fruitful new collaboration of liberal and orthodox thought? *Negatively*, I would say, by dropping its hope of realizing the Kingdom of God fully within history, and by ceasing to identify the progress of the Kingdom with the success of particular human plans and programs. *Positively*, by working out a new view of God's advancing Providence in history, which would be a moral substitute for the abandoned doctrine of progress. Crucial to such a view would be the ancient conviction that God always saves a remnant, whenever judgment descends upon a nation or a civilization; and on this remnant a new order, fitter to endure, is founded. Evil and good grow together, between judgments; but there is a divisive quality in evil which forever tends towards its destruction, and definitely rules out the possibility of a final victory of evil; while good has inward strength



that survives many crucifixions and forever rises to new resurrections. Though God's good Kingdom is thus stronger than evil, its final and eternal victory can come only through great tribulations and be snatched, so to speak, out of the very jaws of the still insurgent Anti-Christ. If liberals recognize this much truth in the orthodox view of history, they have a right to ask the orthodox, in their turn, not to gaze perpetually at the far heavenly horizon, but to lend a hand in that portion of the task of realizing the Kingdom on earth which God assigns to this generation.

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We have had time only to set up a few signposts along the path the new liberalism must follow. Our description of the change from the old liberalism to the new has necessarily been schematic and over-simplified. In order to make the need of change perfectly clear, we have drawn our illustrations almost entirely from that form of the old liberalism which was closely allied with idealistic philosophy, so that it was logically led to a one-sided emphasis on the supremacy of reason, the immanence of God, the divinity of man, and the certainty of progress. The historical justification for concentrating on this type of liberalism is that it actually was the dominant tradition or (as Santayana called it, the "genteel tradition") in American religious thought from the time of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Horace Bushnell until after the First World War. In the early part of this century, other types of liberalism sprang up alongside of it, some of which proved merely transitional, while others were prophetic of the new liberalism, as I believe Professor Lyman's thought truly was.

In the new liberalism as in the old, there is bound to be variety; and some of the varieties are already appear-

ing. We have already suggested that the Boston University Personalist thinkers are offering a live alternative to neo-orthodoxy, while showing a willingness to accept and digest some of its truths. In order to qualify as genuine *neo*-liberals, the Boston Personalists must become more severely critical of the idealistic philosophy which still dominates their thought. All the one-sided emphases we have rejected are implicit in this philosophy, now and forever. I believe these deviations could be balanced and corrected, without falling into the equal and opposite deviations of neo-orthodoxy, if, without ceasing to stress the prime importance of personality in God and man, this school of thought could gradually pass from personal *idealism* to a personal *realism* similar to that of Archbishop Temple.

Another possible form of the new liberalism is to be seen in the group of religious naturalists and humanists, headed by Henry Nelson Wieman, who published *Religious Liberals Reply*, in 1947. It is significant that some of these thinkers formerly repudiated the term "liberal," but now have picked it up again. I confess that this book looks to me more like an alarmed defense reaction than like a promising constructive effort. The critique of neo-orthodoxy is sometimes very keen, but the positive platform of this new liberalism fails to appear very clearly. The one thing the members of this group have in common with each other, and with the Boston Personalists, is a sense of the importance of reason in religious thought. On this common platform, I stand with them, believing that neo-orthodoxy will degenerate into barren authoritarianism and lose its capacity to interpret the events of our time, if it is unwilling to explain and justify any part of its teachings at the bar of reason. My main difference with them is that I recognize the dimension of transcendence in God, in Christ and in history, as they predominantly do not. It seems a tragedy to me that this new naturalistic type of liberalism should repeat the mistake of the old idealistic liberalism, and confine itself to the imma-



ment sphere that can be measured and explored by reason. <sup>(1)</sup>

There is a depth in all the ultimate questions of life that is accessible only to faith, through revelation. The new liberalism ought to join with the new orthodoxy in reverent awe before this depth; but at the same time it must interpret the revelations that come forth from this depth in terms derived from the natural and human spheres; and it must judge its faith rationally, by its consistency with truth in every sphere, and by its capacity to interpret the actual events of history as they occur. The new liberalism should try to hold reason and faith, God immanent and God transcendent, Christ human and Christ divine, history and eternity in proper balance, and in "close and vital relation." It will fail in this, as every human system of thought finally fails; but in its failure it will help to correct the equal and opposite failures of its antagonists.

- (1). I do not mean, of course, to suggest that the new naturalism simply *repeats* the pattern of the old idealistic liberalism. In spite of the phobia the naturalists seem to have for the word "transcendence," some of them (Wieman above all) have room in their thought for what I call the *dimension* of transcendence. Consider the distinction he makes between "creative good" and "created good" in *The Source of Human Good*.

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